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COMMENTARY

Prepare For The Ultimate Gaslighting

April 14, 2020 | By Julio Vincent Gambuto

A lone bicyclist peddles though an empty Dewey Square Plaza outside South Station at rush hour which would normally be bustling with people catching trains home, Thursday, March 26, 2020, in Boston. It's a scene playing out all over the world. The spaces we filled, now filled with space. (David Goldman/AP)

This article is more than 4 years old.

First, a primer: Gaslighting, if you don't know the word, is defined as manipulation into doubting your own sanity. As in, *Carl made Mary think she was crazy, even though she clearly caught him cheating. He gaslit her.*

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Billions of dollars will be spent on advertising, messaging and media content to make you feel comfortable again. It will come in traditional forms — a billboard here, commercials there — and in new-media forms, like memes.

In truth, you crave that feeling of normalcy. We want desperately to feel good again, to get back to the routines of life, to not lie in bed at night wondering how we're going to afford our rent and bills, to not wake to an endless scroll of human tragedy on our phones, to have a cup of perfectly brewed coffee and simply leave the house for work. The need for comfort will be real, and it will be strong. And every brand in America will come to your rescue, dear consumer, to help take away that darkness and get life back to the way it was before the crisis. I urge you to be well aware of what is coming.

Pretty soon, as the country begins to figure out how to "reopen" and move forward, very powerful forces will try to convince us all to get back to normal ... I urge you to be well aware of what is coming.

For the last century, the advertising industry has been centered around this cardinal principle: Find the consumer's problem and fix it with your product. When the problem is practical and tactical, the solution is "as seen on TV" and available at Home Depot. Command strips and Magic Erasers will save me from having to repaint. Elfa shelving will get rid of the mess in my closet. The Ring will let me see who's on the porch if I can't take my eyes off Netflix.

But when the problem is emotional, the fix becomes a new staple in your life, and you become a lifelong loyalist. Coca-Cola makes you happy. A Mercedes makes you successful. Taking your family on a Royal Caribbean cruise makes you special.

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Smart marketers know how to highlight what brands can do for you to make your life easier. But brilliant marketers know how to rewire your heart. And, make no mistake, the heart is what has been most traumatized this last month. We are, as a society, now vulnerable in a whole new way.

What the trauma has shown us, though, cannot be unseen.

A carless Los Angeles has clear blue skies. In a quiet New York, you can hear the birds chirp in the middle of Madison Avenue. Coyotes have been spotted on the Golden Gate Bridge. These are the postcard images of what the world might be like if we could find a way to have a less deadly daily effect on the planet.

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In this Friday, March 20, 2020 file photo, two pairs of hikers maintain social distance as they mingle at Vista View Point in Griffith Park in Los Angeles as storm clouds pass through. Southern Californians are seeing excellent air quality, resulting from business closures during the coronavirus pandemic and recent rain. (Chris Pizzello/AP)

What's not fit for a postcard are the other scenes we have witnessed: a health care system that cannot provide basic protective equipment for its frontline; small businesses — and very large ones — that do not have enough cash to pay their rent or workers, sending over 16 million people to seek unemployment benefits; a government that has so severely damaged the credibility of our media that 328 million people don't know who to listen to for basic facts that can save their lives.

The cat is out of the bag. We, as a nation, have deeply disturbing problems. You're right. That's not news. These are problems we ignore every day, not because we're terrible people or because we don't care, but because we don't have time.

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The plain truth is that no matter our ethnicity, race, religion, gender or political party, as Americans we share this: We are busy. We're out and about hustling to make our own lives work. We have goals to meet and meetings to attend and mortgages to pay — all while the phone is ringing and the laptop is pinging. And when we get home, Crate and Barrel and Louis Vuitton and Andy Cohen make us feel just good enough to get up the next day and do it all over again. It is very easy to close your eyes to a problem when you barely have enough time to close them to sleep.

The greatest misconception among us, which causes deep and painful social and political tension every day in this country, is that we somehow don't care about each other. White people don't care about the problems of black America. Men don't care about women's rights. Cops don't care about the communities they serve. Humans don't care about the environment. These things couldn't be further from the truth. We do care. We just don't have the time to do anything about it. Maybe that's just me. But maybe it's you, too.

Well, the treadmill you've been on for decades just stopped. Bam! And that feeling you have right now is the same as if you'd been thrown off your Peloton bike and onto the ground: What just happened?!

I hope you might consider this: What happened is incredible. It's the greatest gift ever unwrapped. Not the deaths, not the virus, of course, but The Great Pause. It is, in a word, profound. Please don't recoil from the bright light beaming through the window. I know it hurts your eyes. It hurts mine, too. But the curtain is wide open.

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Kris Jaeger with Broad Street Ministry waits to distribute food outside of City Hall in Philadelphia, Monday, April 13, 2020. (Matt Rourke/AP)

The crisis has given us a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see ourselves and our country in the plainest way. At no other time, ever in our lives, have we gotten the opportunity to see what would happen if the world simply stopped. Here it is. We're in it. Stores are closed. Restaurants are empty. Streets and six-lane highways are barren. Even the surface of the planet is rumbling less (true story). And because it is rarer than rare, it has brought to light all of the beautiful and painful truths of how we live.

If we want to create a better country and a better world for our kids, and if we want to make sure we are even sustainable as a nation and as a democracy, we have to pay attention to how we feel right now. I cannot speak for you, but I imagine you feel like I do: devastated, depressed and heartbroken.

What a perfect time for Best Buy and H&M and Wal-Mart to help me feel normal again. If I could just have the new iPhone in my hand, if I could rest my feet on a pillow of new Nikes, if I could drink a venti vanilla latte, then this very dark feeling

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From one citizen to another, I implore you: take a deep breath, ignore the deafening noise, and think deeply about what you want to put back into your life.

You think I'm kidding, that I'm being cute, that I'm denying the obvious benefits of having a roaring economy. You're right. Our way of life is not without purpose. The economy is not, at its core, evil. Brands and their products create millions of jobs. Like people — and most anything in life — there are brands that are responsible and ethical, and there are others that are not. They are all part of a system that keeps us living long and strong. We have lifted more humans out of poverty through the power of economics than any other civilization in history. Yes, without a doubt, Americanism can be a force for good.

But, at the same time, its flaws have been laid bare for all to see. It doesn't work for everyone. It's responsible for great destruction. Its intentions have been perverted, and the protection it offers has disappeared. In fact, it's been brought to its knees by one pangolin (we have reason to believe). We have got to do better and find a way toward a responsible free market.

Until then, get ready, my friends. What is about to be unleashed on American society will be the greatest campaign ever created to get you to feel normal again. It will come from brands, it will come from government, it will even come from each other, and it will come from the left and from the right. We will do anything, spend anything, believe anything, just so we can take away how horribly uncomfortable all of this feels. There will be an all-out blitz to make you believe you never saw what you saw.

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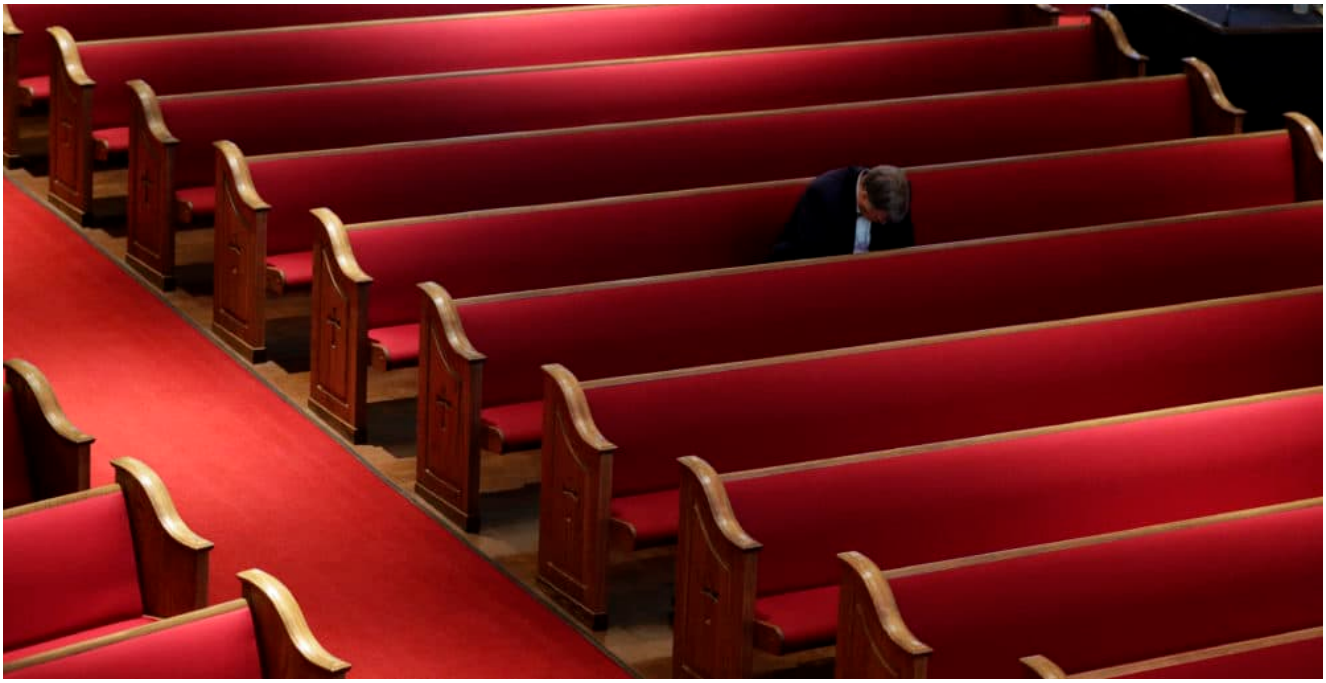

A man prays while attending an Easter service at Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Sunday, April 12, 2020. Many churches are adapting their services as Christians around the world are celebrating Easter at a distance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Eric Gay/AP)

The air wasn't really cleaner; those images were photoshopped. The hospitals weren't really a war zone; those stories were hyperbole. The numbers were not that high; the press is lying. You didn't see people in masks standing in the rain risking their lives to vote. Not in America. You didn't see the leader of the free world push an unproven miracle drug like a late-night infomercial salesman. That was a crisis update. You didn't see homeless people dead on the street. You didn't see inequality. You didn't see indifference. You didn't see utter failure of leadership and systems.

But you did. You are not crazy, my friends.

And so we are about to be gaslit in a truly unprecedented way. It starts with a check for $1,200. And it will be a one-two punch from big business and the White House. Both are about to band together to knock us unconscious again. It will be funded like no other operation in our lifetimes. It will be fast. It will be furious. And it will be overwhelming. The Great American Return to Normal is coming.

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This is our chance to define a new version of normal, a rare and truly sacred (yes, sacred) opportunity to get rid of the noise and to only bring back what works for us, what makes our lives richer, what makes our kids happier, what makes us truly proud.

You are not crazy, my friends.

We care deeply about one another. That is clear. That can be seen in every supportive Facebook post, in every meal dropped off for a neighbor, in every Zoom birthday party. We are a good people. And as a good people, we want to define — on our own terms — what this country looks like in five, 10, 50 years. This is our chance to do that. And it's the best chance we'll ever get.

We can do that on a personal scale in our homes, in how we choose to spend our family time on nights and weekends, what we watch, what we listen to, what we eat, and what we choose to spend our dollars on and where. We can do it locally in our communities, in what organizations we support, what truths we tell and what events we attend. And we can do it nationally in our government, in which leaders we vote in and to whom we give power. If we want cleaner air, we can make it happen. If we want to protect our doctors and nurses from the next virus — and protect all Americans — we can make it happen. If we want our neighbors and friends to earn a dignified income, we can make that happen. If we want 29.7 million kids to be able to eat lunch if suddenly their school is closed, we can make that happen. And, yes, if we just want to live a simpler life, we can make that happen, too.

But only if we resist the massive gaslighting that is about to come. It's on its way. Look out.

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Julio Vincent Gambuto *is a writer/director in NYC and LA. His latest film, "Team Marco," is currently at film festivals worldwide. You can find out more about him and his work here. A version of this essay was originally posted on Medium.*

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